

The mission of the church: integral mission

Poverty is multi-dimensional. It is about lacking basic needs. Often, people think of basic needs as merely physical – such as food, clothes and shelter. But there are other dimensions of poverty, such as social poverty (lack of opportunity to interact with other people), political poverty (lack of ability to influence people in positions of power) and spiritual poverty (lack of relationship with God through Jesus Christ).

By looking at poverty like this, we can say that most people in the world are poor in some way – occasionally, sometimes or all of the time. For example, someone who is materially rich could lack social networks or they may be in spiritual poverty. On the other hand, someone who is materially poor could have a supportive family and be a Christian, and therefore feel socially and spiritually rich.

The church is called to meet people's needs through loving them in the way that God loves them. The church is God's agent of transformation in communities. However, over the years, churches have interpreted their mission to love others in different ways:

- Some churches have focused only on the spiritual aspects of poverty. Their expression of love to the community has been in proclaiming the gospel.
- Some churches have expressed love through focusing on people's material needs without giving enough attention to spiritual needs. They demonstrate the gospel without necessarily proclaiming it.
- Some churches have actively been involved in addressing all types of needs but have failed to make the linkage between them. They have treated proclamation and demonstration of the gospel separately.

In this section we look at 'integral mission'. This term is used to describe the church's mission to meet people's needs in a multi-dimensional way. We argue that proclamation and demonstration of the gospel should not be separated. Integral mission is about speaking of and living out our faith in an undivided way, in all aspects of life. Without integral mission, the degree to which the kingdom of God can be shown and extended in this world can be limited.

Since churches tend to separate proclamation and demonstration of the gospel, we will explain integral mission in this section by showing why the separation should not be made.

Explanation of terms

Proclamation means telling people the gospel, and is sometimes called 'evangelism'.

Demonstration means showing people what it means to be part of God's kingdom, such as through physically helping others to reduce poverty such as physical or political poverty. It is sometimes called 'social action' or 'social involvement' because it involves addressing needs in society.

The term **integral mission** comes from the Spanish 'misión integral' and can also be referred to as 'holistic ministry', '(w)holistic development', 'Christian development' or 'transformational development'.

The need for the church to be involved in demonstrating the gospel

Social involvement is part of what God expects Christians to do:

Social involvement is rooted in the character of God. God is concerned for people's basic needs, whether spiritual or material. Social involvement is part of his character (for example, see Psalm 146:7-9). He opposes those who are responsible for injustice and sides with the victims of oppression. This does not mean that God is biased towards poor people and gives them preferential treatment. All people are important to God, shown in his grace to all people, whether rich or poor. However, in a world where there is bias towards the wealthy and powerful, God's actions will always be seen as an opposite bias.

God's character is most fully revealed in the person of Jesus Christ, who showed and preached concern for the poor (Luke 4:18-19; Matthew 4:23; Matthew 9:35-38; Matthew 14:14; Luke 12:33).

We are called to care for those around us. God expects us to mirror his concern for the oppressed (see Proverbs 31:8-9 and Isaiah 1:10-17). We are to care for those around us (Mark 12:28-34). Jesus told the parable of the good Samaritan (Luke 10:25-37), showing that we are to care for people across social and cultural divides.

The links between proclamation and demonstration of the gospel

There is a natural link between demonstration and proclamation:

- When proclamation of the gospel leads to repentance by those who respond to it, there are social implications. Jesus Christ becomes Lord over every area of their lives, so that there is transformation beyond the spiritual. In recognition of Christ's authority and through a desire to please him, Christians seek to reflect the justice and love of God in their own lifestyle and relationships, and in society as a whole. James 2:15-18 calls us to do good deeds to show evidence of our faith in Christ. Proclamation therefore leads to social involvement.
- This social involvement (demonstration), in turn, has consequences for proclamation as Christians bear witness to the transforming grace of Jesus Christ.

We should always be aware of our motivation and what we are witnessing to, and ensure that this is communicated to those around us. Social involvement has to be an integral part of the mission of the church, but it is important that it is carried out alongside proclamation of the gospel. As the box opposite shows, social involvement complements proclamation, and proclamation complements social involvement. Christians are called to do both. We cannot do one in isolation from the other.

There is sometimes a tendency to separate the death and resurrection of Jesus from his earthly life. While his death and resurrection are of central importance, there is much that we can learn from Jesus' life and ministry on earth. His way of life and actions are a model for the mission of the church as much as his preaching. The Micah Declaration on Integral Mission states: 'As in the life of Jesus, being, doing and saying are at the heart of our integral task.'

Proclamation and demonstration are inseparable

Proclamation is reinforced by our social involvement. The gospel is interpreted in the context of the lives and actions of the people who share it and their relationships with one another. If a Christian tells someone the gospel, but does not display evidence of being a Christian through caring for others, the perceived value of the gospel to the person who hears it is weakened. Social involvement is an advertisement for God's kingdom where relationships with God and each other are restored (Matthew 5:14-16).

Social involvement acts as a signpost. However, if done without communicating the gospel message, it can point people in the wrong direction:

- Rather than pointing to God, it can point to us.
- It can wrongly communicate that salvation is about doing good works.
- It can deny the importance of reconciliation with God by indicating that improving economic and social situations are all that matter.

Social involvement helps people in their earthly lives, but does not bring blessing beyond that.

NOTE: While it is important to proclaim the gospel as well as demonstrate it, people should never be forced to convert. Some religious groups may require people to convert to their religion so that they qualify for receiving aid. We believe that this is totally wrong. It is vital that Christians share unconditional love with everyone, through word and deed. Unwillingness to care for those of a different religion is denying God's grace towards us and towards them.

Source: *ROOTS 11: Partnering with the local church*, Tearfund 2007, pages 10-13